

SAMUEL A. GOMPERS MEMORIAL PARK AND

HABS NO. DC-675

RESERVATION NO. 68

(Edmund Burke Park)

(Reservation Nos. 68, 68A, 69, and 69A)

Intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and

L Street between Tenth and Eleventh streets, NW
Washington

District of Columbia

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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(Edmund Burke Park)
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Location: Intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and L Street between Tenth and Eleventh streets, NW.

Owner/Manager: U.S. government, National Park Service.

Present Use: Sitting parks, memorial sites, directional islands.

Significance: An open rectangle created by the latitudinal shift of L Street at Massachusetts Avenue, this open space has been divided into two large freestanding triangles and two paved directional islands. The large triangles have been landscaped as parks since the 1880s and each feature memorial statues; British philosopher Edmund Burke in Reservation No. 68 and labor leader Samuel Gompers in Reservation No. 69.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1792, Ellicott Plan.
2. Original and subsequent owners: Within a portion of tract of land known as Port Royal owned by James Peerce, the land for this reservation was acquired by the federal government for streets and avenues in 1791.¹
3. First improvement: Reservation Nos. 68 and 69 were first improved in 1875; Reservation Nos. 68A and 69A were first improved in 1921.
4. Alterations and additions:

1904:	Post-and-chain fencing in Reservation Nos. 68 and 69 replaced with quarter-round-coping.
1916:	Reservation No. 68A created through transfer of 589 square feet, and No. 69A created through the transfer of 1,063 square feet from the District Commissioners to the OPB&G.
1921:	Reservation Nos. 68A and 69A paved with brick and planted, each with a single central tree.
1922:	Edmund Burke statue erected in Reservation No. 68.
1926:	386 square feet from Reservation No. 68 and 248 square feet from Reservation No. 68A transferred to the District of Columbia Commissioners to widen Eleventh Street.

¹ McNeil, 43, 48.

1933 Samuel Gompers statue dedicated in Reservation No. 69.

1939: 497.5 square feet of Reservation No. 68 transferred from the OPB&G to the District of Columbia Commissioners.

B. Historical Context:

On Ellicott's plan of the city, L Street changes longitude at its intersection with Massachusetts Avenue, creating a rectangular open space between the city squares assigned for private development. Months after the land for the streets and the open spaces at their intersections were conveyed free-of-charge to the federal government, real estate speculator John Davidson purchased the land around this square from James Pearce. Before the right-of-way was improved or the surrounding squares developed, the area was known as Nighthawk Hill because the elevated area was a popular hunting ground.² Located near the Northern Liberties neighborhood, the area attracted residents in the mid nineteenth century, while much of the rest of the city remained undeveloped. By the 1850s, numerous structures faced onto the space according to the Boschke map of 1857-61, but the park was probably still unimproved.³ One of these structures which still remains is the Federal-style Nourse House at 1107 Massachusetts Avenue. An elegant Greek Revival dwelling was built adjacent to it during the Civil War. Until the 1920s, this house was known all over Washington as the Wisteria House because of the vines that covered much of its facade.⁴

After the Civil War, vast infrastructural improvements were made throughout the city by the Board of Public Works, an arm of the territorial government which controlled the city from 1871-74. The board oversaw the grading and paving of miles of streets, the laying of gas lines and the planting of street trees. The Army Corps of Engineers, in charge of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G) seconded the efforts of the local government by creating parks in the federally owned land in the newly developed areas.

During the first year of the territorial government, Col. Orville Babcock oversaw the production of a map to show the federal reservations that were formed by the city's unique street configuration. The plan indicated that this rectangular open space contained two trapezoids under federal jurisdiction, allowing the path of Massachusetts Avenue to run unimpeded through the space. This pattern was probably established by existing vehicular traffic patterns.

The following year, Babcock reported that both trapezoids were enclosed with picket fences, but the parks were not improved until 1875. Because of the high elevation of the area, the reservations first needed to be graded and much of the earth moved was transported to Rawlins Park on New York Avenue, which was also being improved. After being leveled, 1,200 loads of good soil were spread on the parks and grass seed was planted. Like most of the parks being improved at the time, they were enclosed with post-and-chain fences to protect the new plantings. Asphalt walks for pedestrians were laid and two drinking fountains

² Federal Writers Project, 681.

³ Boschke Map.

⁴ Federal Writers Project, 681.

donated by the Architect of the Capitol were moved from the west Capitol Grounds and placed in each reservation and supplied with water and drainage. Eight lamp posts, designed to match the fence posts, were erected in the parks "to furnish ample light, and make the appearance of these reservations uniform."⁵ It was around this time that two Washington merchants, Reuben B. Clark and David L. Morrison, built the duplex north of the park and local Episcopalians built the Church of the Ascension on the northwest corner. Both buildings survive today.

By 1884 the parks, which were landscaped similarly, featured evergreen and deciduous trees and dwarf shrubs. On the official map of reservations issued by the Army Corps of Engineers, the westerly park was designated as Reservation No. 68 and the other, Reservation No. 69. Also by this time, Reservation No. 68 featured two large flower vases, and Reservation No. 69 had one.

As the city became more civilized and tastes changed, the parks were updated. Although the planting plans were largely unaltered, quarter-round concrete coping replaced the fencing in 1904. Since Washington's reservations are technically within the right-of-way of the streets and avenues, they have been altered to meet changing traffic needs. To better channel the automobile traffic, which began replacing slower horse-pulled vehicles in the early twentieth century, two triangular traffic islands were built in this open space to better define Eleventh Street. Designated as Reservation Nos. 68A and 69A these raised islands were paved with bricks in 1921; each was planted with a single tree in the center.

Reservation Nos. 68 and 69 were also embellished with statuary in the early twentieth century. The portrait statue of Edmund Burke, designed by sculptor J. Harvard Thomas and architect Horace W. Peaslee, was erected in Reservation No. 68 in 1922. The 8'-tall bronze statue of the English orator and statesman is a copy of one in Bristol, England, Burke's former constituency. It was donated to the people of the United States by Sir Charles Cheers through the Sulgrave Institution. It stands upon a granite base inscribed with Burke's name and his quotation, "Magnanimity in politics is seldom the truest wisdom."⁶ Throughout the 1920s, several high-rise apartment buildings were built in the neighborhood and the Women's Army and Navy League purchased the Morrison-Clark House and began boarding servicemen when they came to the city.⁷

In 1933, Reservation No. 69 was relandscaped to receive the Samuel Gompers memorial. Designed by Robert I. Aitken, it was purchased with \$130,000 donated by the American Federation of Labor. President and Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt attended the dedication ceremony on October 7, 1933.⁸ The reservation was officially designated as Samuel Gompers Memorial Park in 1955.

During World War II, the Women's Army and Navy League facing the park--renamed the Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen's Club--served as a boarding house for 45,645 men.⁹ The structure survives today as an elegant hotel

⁵ Annual Report . . ., 1875, 11.

⁶ Goode, 277.

⁷ Massachusetts Avenue Architecture, 1-7.

⁸ Goode, 276.

⁹ Massachusetts Avenue Architecture, 1-7.

and restaurant, and is characterized by a Chinese porch with a "Shanghai" mansard roof added in 1917. The adjacent structure, also ornamented with Chinese detailing, serves as a church for the Chinese community. During the 1950-60s, many of the more prosperous occupants left the neighborhood in the vicinity of the parks. Several blocks east of this park were decimated in the 1969 riots that broke out in Washington in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Gradually, businesses have replaced the former residences, and two large office buildings were built on the south side of the parks in the 1970s.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Overall dimensions: According to a 1966 survey, Reservation No. 68 covers 0.37 acres, and Reservation No. 69 covers approximately 0.41.
- B. Materials:
 1. Pathways, paving: Both reservations are surrounded by perimeter walks of both brick and concrete. Reservation No. 68 features a central round shrub bed surrounded by a circular concrete sidewalk. Four straight sidewalks radiate from this central area to the perimeter sidewalks. A straight sidewalk runs from the north to south side east of the statue.

A single straight concrete path runs through Reservation No. 69 from the southwest to the east side. The Gompers statue sits on a black aggregate terrace approached on the southwest side by three wide steps.

Reservation Nos. 68A and 69A are paved with concrete.
 2. Vegetation: The large panels in Reservation Nos. 68 and 69 are sodded. Reservation No. 68 features a central, sparsely planted shrub bed. The circular sidewalk surrounding it is flanked on the east and west sides by a low formal hedge. Several young trees have been planted east of the statue and in the grass panels. One mature tree stands at the northwest corner. Reservation No. 69 features a formal evergreen hedge running along the north side. Large holly trees are clustered at the north corners and two large deciduous trees shade the large grassy panels. Street trees have been planted along L Street in Reservation No. 68 and Massachusetts Avenue in Reservation No. 69.
 3. Structures:
 - a. Fences: The central shrub bed in Reservation No. 68 is surrounded by a low iron fence. A metal picket fence runs along the north side of Reservation No. 69.
 - b. Benches: Metal-frame wood-slat benches face onto the internal paths in Reservation No. 68. Two concrete-support wood-slat benches face southeast onto the path through Reservation No. 69.
 - c. Statues, markers:
 - i. The 16'-tall Samuel Gompers Memorial consists of a seated portrait statue of the labor leader, and six allegorical figures

representing the American Labor Movement, all atop a large granite base. Among the figures are various emblems of labor, such as a steam locomotive engine. The base is inscribed with Gompers words.¹⁰ It is placed centrally in Reservation No. 69 and faces south. Two engraved plaques placed in the northwest and southeast corners identify the reservation as Samuel Gompers Memorial Park.

- ii. The 8'-tall bronze portrait statue of Edmund Burke stands on a granite base inscribed with Burke's name and quotation, "Magnanimity in politics is seldom the truest wisdom." It is located on the east side of the Reservation No. 68 and faces east.

C. Site:

1. Character of surrounding structures: This intersection is surrounded by mid- and high-rise office and apartment buildings.
2. Traffic patterns: L Street traffic on the north side of the parks is one way heading west and feeds into Massachusetts Avenue heading northwest. L Street traffic on the south side of the parks is one way heading east and feeds into Massachusetts Avenue heading southeast. Twelfth Street is one way heading north; Tenth and Eleventh streets support two-way traffic.
3. Vistas: There are vistas northwest along Massachusetts Avenue to Thomas Circle from Reservation No. 68 and southeast along Massachusetts Avenue to the Carnegie Library in Mount Vernon Square from Reservation No. 69.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

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Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Plan of the City of Washington, District of Columbia, showing the Public Reservations." Prepared by Orville E. Babcock. 1871.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Map of the City of Washington showing

¹⁰ Goode, Outdoor Sculpture, 276.

the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

B. Park plans: See Supplemental Information below and attached plan. Additional plans are located at the Office of Land Use, National Capital Region.

C. Early Views:

ca. 1927: Survey photographs of both reservations (NPS Reservation Files).

D. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. Annual Reports of the Chief of Engineers. 1867-1933.

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Goode, James M. The Outdoor Sculpture of Washington, D.C. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974.

McNeil, Priscilla W. "Rock Creek Hundred: Land Conveyed for the Federal City." Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer, 1991): 34-51.

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National

Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.

PART V. SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Page 8	1922:	Construction plan for Reservation No. 68 showing park layout and trees, revised in 1927 (NPS Reservation Files).
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